

# *Sketch*

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## The Human Highway

Shane Noecker\*

\*Iowa State University

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## *The Human Highway*

I've been accused of being a storyteller before. Not a storyteller in the sense that I exaggerate or lie, but in how I relate to people, my style of conversation. Neither witty nor well read, I rely on stories I've heard or experienced to get me through every ball game, dinner party, and family reunion where small talk is a necessity.

The following story is one I heard in a slummy bar in Minneapolis from a professor of mathematics at one of the local community colleges there. His name was Kelly. I never found out if it was a first or a last name. Believe it or not, I do have a male friend whose Christian name is Kelly; otherwise, I'm sure I would just assume it was a last name. Experience forces one to assume less and less.

Committing the story to paper is something I've hesitated to do for some time because readers can't see my eyes or hear the inflection in my voice as the story is told. I'm guessing it will make a difference. I'll have you know that I have never had the authenticity of the story questioned by anyone whom I've told it to, and I am sure that Kelly didn't either because the cracks in my voice, and the hot tears that well-up but don't fall, are tawdry imitations of him.

The look in Kelly's eyes was a look I trusted completely. If he had looked at my pupils with those great brown orbs of his and told me Honest Abe Lincoln was a bald-faced liar I wouldn't have given the accusation a second thought. There was a familiar, paternal aura about him too, but I don't use these traits as my proof of his honesty. I connected with the man on a deeper level. For that night, in the bar, Kelly was as honest with himself as he was with me. We had both come in looking for love and then settled for camaraderie. I feel a very definite bond with him even as I write this.

It was a warm November night in the late eighties. I walked into the dark, golden bar and plopped down one stool away from Kelly. When I first saw him, he was sipping a beer while surveying the prospects of the bar. I had plans to do likewise. Between us there was a black ashtray with a dozen cigarette filters, all smoldering to differing degrees in a half-inch of ash. As the smoke encircled our faces, and wafted back around our necks, Kelly and I both acted very cool and unaffected, as though we

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were hard-core alcoholics, downtrodden, and only there for the drink. This ruse seemed somehow better than admitting outright to being lonely lovers. The lonely are the lowest of all lovers, lower than the unrequited or the spurned.

An unspoken contest to see who could lure in the most kissable, come-hither woman started the moment I sat down. I have never been one to use pickup lines or start a conversation with talk of the air and clouds. My *modus operandi* is to make eyes at a girl from clear across the room and wait for the lovely darling to come sashaying over to me. Bare in mind I'm fairly handsome myself, with large, dark eyes and a head of hair that inexplicably seems to grow thicker as I age. My method doesn't work for everyone. Do not envy me though. Remember I have neither brains nor wit.

Kelly had brains and though not as handsome as I, he also had a rough beauty to him. His hair was long and majestic like a stallion's mane, and he had a tight jaw line covered with soft, even stubble.

I was casting for a smooth redhead in the corner. She was sitting at a table with four other beauties. I had her eye inside of a minute. I glanced at Kelly for a moment and followed his gaze out to a gorgeous, dark darling wearing a purple dress and drinking a cocktail. I said something like, "There's a looker," and when he glanced over at me I saw something in his eye. It was a look I could almost hear. It lingered between his iris and his pupil and then disappeared up his optic nerve. He obviously saw whatever it was in my eyes too. The look was part hesitation and part futility, and part a realization that everything done up to that point was vanity and tomorrow would be too if we continued to ride in the rut we were in.

He looked down at his drink. "This is funny," he said. "Cute actually. We could be lying in the morgue an hour from now. Why do we take such a round about path to our goal?"

He stood up next to his stool. I thought he was going to march right over to the dashing brunette and kiss her, but instead he raised his hand and said, "Bartender, bring me two shot glasses and your cheapest whiskey—the bottle." He sat back down on the empty stool between us and quietly filled each jigger so the liquid humped up like a watch glass above the lip.

When he was finished pouring he said, "You're

not still making eyes at that fiery red-haired lass are you?"

"No," I said, a bit wary. I looked over at the red head. Suddenly she wasn't as gorgeous, and I suspected her hair was dyed.

I turned back to Kelly. He dipped a finger in his glass and brought it to his mouth. He began to tell me his strange and terrific tale.

In the mid-seventies, in the sixth year of his university studies, Kelly was driving north on the interstate through Kentucky on a chilling winter Wednesday night. He had started driving at half-past midnight after finishing a shift tending bar at a place called Courtney's Cheap Beer Bar in Louisville. He had received word during his shift that his father had fallen ill and he was to come home as soon as he could. A night of driving lay between him and his hometown of Springfield, Illinois.

He was travelling at seventy miles an hour in the right hand lane of the northbound interstate. Occasionally, he saw through the black, clawing trees, headlights flying south. But Kelly didn't run into anybody going his way. There were some semis parked along the side of the road, at the rest areas, and along the on ramps, but none were running freight that late. Or if any were running, they were running at seventy miles an hour, just over the next hill. Kelly traipsed down the side of every empty hill and came up to the top of the next to see only another stretch of forsaken road, the asphalt running ahead of him like unspoiled slate.

The man on the radio said the time was one twenty-five when Kelly at last saw the red brake lights of a car in the distance. He came up on the car fast. It was going forty-five at most. Before switching lanes to pass he looked up into his mirror out of pure instinct. And that same second he glanced in the mirror, it blazed bright from the headlights of a second car travelling in the left lane and going much faster than he was. There wasn't time to accelerate and pass the sedan in front of him before the car behind came down the hill, so he touched down on his brake and stayed in the right lane.

The speeding headlights were the front of a big black sedan. Most everyone drove sedans in those days, Kelly's car was a blue one and the one in front of him was rusted brown. The black sedan shone its brake lights as

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soon as it got past Kelly and slowed to the same speed as the brown car. Both cars were neck and neck climbing the hill at forty miles an hour, each filling its lane from line to painted line. There was no way for Kelly to pass.

Some kind of kid prank, Kelly thought. You drive next to a slow moving vehicle and piss off everyone behind you. Well, it was working. It worked quick. Kelly was not in the mood. However, he was in the process of becoming an educated man and he knew already not to let his anger get the best of him. He decided to wait out this minor annoyance. Kids out for kicks on a Wednesday night won't drive all the way to Illinois, he figured. So he kept up with the cars but drove as if nothing was wrong.

After ten minutes of feigning nonchalantness and thinking about his dad, Kelly started to tap his fingers heavily on the dashboard. The tapping sounded like a galloping horse. Kelly hadn't seen him in almost three years. Dad had been ill for about a month now. Mom said there wasn't much the doctors could do for him, but he'd just been hovering between health and sickness while the moon waxed and waned. Kelly could hear his mother's thin voice on the phone from earlier in the evening. She hadn't used a contraction the whole conversation. "He is sick. I would like for you to come home tonight."

Even these prankster kids would yield if they knew my situation, Kelly thought. But that's what growing up was wasn't it? Treating everyone as though they had a sick dad.

Kelly turned on his brights to glimpse at the insides of the sedans. The Oldsmobile in the right lane was painted a shade of brown that made it impossible to discern where the paint ended and the rust began. Through the back windshield the outline of the driver's head peeked over the headrest. Long hair flowed straight down from the peak of the head forming a bell-shaped silhouette. The hair wasn't apparently masculine or feminine. It was as likely a hippie's as it was a matron's.

The car in the fast lane was the color of a crow. When Kelly's headlights reflected off the trunk it seemed that some of the light was absorbed and only a very little reflected back. It was that black. But at the same time as it appeared dark, it also seemed dusty and somehow ephemeral. Whoever was driving was completely hidden by the seat.

The black car had no license plate—clever kids. Though the car on the right did have one, it was rusted and bent down so that the light meant to illuminate the numbers and letters shadowed them instead. All Kelly could make out was a "D." Convenient and odd, he thought. Though he didn't know what he would do if he had the plate numbers written out before him anyway. What the sedans were doing was, after all, not even against the law.

Kelly drifted into a hazy mesmerized trance driving the road at a slow and constant speed, watching the white lines drift backward while following the four fuzzy red lights. The edges of his eyes blurred as though he was peering through the barrel of a gun. In this state he barely heard the radioman say as the signal was growing muffled, "...all for our show. The time now is two o'clock." Already two o'clock.

Kelly leaned forward on the steering wheel. His gas tank was nearly empty. He exited and drove to a gas station a quarter mile off the interstate. He topped off his tank and went inside the rickety gas station shack where a grizzled old, tobacco-stained waif of man was working the register. Kelly had to wake him up to pay for the gas.

On his way out the door, stuffing four bills into his wallet, Kelly stopped and said to the man, "Can I ask you a strange question?"

The old man eyed him suspiciously. "Just a second," he said in a strained, wavering voice. He held up his index finger and then bared the palm of his hand displaying for Kelly the tribulations he had borne and the scars that remained. Then he shuffled his way into a room on the other side of the store and closed the "Employees Only" door. The noise from a clicking lock resounded.

Kelly looked out on his car next to the gas pump. The lonely headlights and the big gray fender were beckoning him back out. He yelled to the man in back, "It's only a quick question." He waited another minute. Then he went over and knocked on the "Employees Only" door. He got no answer. He tried the handle.

"Are you all right in there sir?" he asked.

There was no answer. Kelly put his ear up against the door. He heard the old man breathing like a winded hog. Such a thin guy must use all his strength in breathing that heavily, Kelly thought. He kicked the door with the bottom of his foot. On his way out he took a bag of potato chips

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and a six-pack of root beer.

When he got back to the interstate he sped forward to make up for lost time. He was weary. He needed to be home.

At the top of a high hill, eleven minutes down the road, Kelly saw the four taillights on the next ridge keeping their slow pace. The eerie red pillars bounced up on a bump and mocked him. He stayed his fast pace as he crested the high hill and at the next hill and the next. Coming down that third hill he reached them. The odometer pushed on eighty. Kelly straddled the white dotted line with his car and tapped his horn. He didn't lay on it; he was too agitated and too nervous. Beep ... Beep ... Beep! Beep! Beep!

Strange signals of garbled Morse code reverberated off the trunks of the surrounding winter trees. The cars seemed oblivious.

Kelly lifted his foot off the gas and coasted. He came up on the sedans close, within inches of their bumpers; then the lights drifted away from him. He rolled to a stop there on the interstate, right in the middle, terribly alone and wondering what to do.

He eyed the shoulder. It was wide enough to pass on. Who was to say though, that taking to the shoulder wasn't just what these forty-miles-an-hour interstate psychos were trying to get him to do? Maybe as soon as he pulled alongside to pass, they would swing to the right, crashing into his car and causing him to careen off into the ditch. The cars would stop a little down the road and their orange hazard lights would come on. The drivers would sneak back to his wrecked car and with long, thin fingers open his door. He'd be out cold from the crash and helpless as a toddler. They'd throw back the door, slowly reach in their skinny, icy fingers and strangle him as he unconsciously writhed for air.

Kelly swore at the constellations above his windshield. He could wait. He could slowly etch his way north through the hills, slave to these unremarkable vehicles and their silhouette drivers. But travelling at half speed as he was, it would take twice the time to reach home. He had neither the patience nor the stamina for that long of a trip. What if he fell asleep and crashed his car in the ditch anyway? Would some other unremarkable car filled with goblins or hoodlums come to steal his life away?

Kelly eased his foot onto the accelerator. He was going forward to face his tormentors. Innocent kids these were not. He no longer had any reservations.

He came up on the twin taillights slowly like a prowling thief with a dagger. Then he dropped his heavy foot. The blood rushing through his ears muffled all the other night noises. He didn't hear the engine as its purr flowed into a roar.

The silhouette of the driver on the right didn't flinch as Kelly raced ahead. When the crash was imminent, Kelly closed his eyes and locked his elbows in anticipation. But the satisfying crunch never came.

In those lightless seconds it drove Kelly wild waiting for the sound and jolt that would follow. He kept his eyes closed for a moment longer, just another moment. Had his excitement slowed time that much? Finally he let his eyes popped open. No, time hadn't slowed. The sedans had simply sped up. Kelly's speedometer was lying down on the right. He shivered like a cat arching its back. This was too much. No payoff after a long or intense anticipation is hell on earth. Kelly's forearms were almost to the point of bursting. He swerved madly in and out of each lane while the gas pedal scrapped the floor. The cars managed to stay barely ahead of him, their back bumpers perfectly in line. Kelly drove like this for a mile without a thought. He was reckless now, maniacal, ready to face death if it came to that. He had forgotten his purpose.

The radio was quiet static. Kelly hadn't bothered to flip it off when he was out of range of the station he had long ago left behind. As he drove north-northwest, seemingly to his death, the static intermingled with sharp, brief spurts of music. It was an old, familiar song, something about heaven. This jarred Kelly. He remembered survival. He slowed, down to seventy, then sixty. The cars slowed with him, staying about six feet ahead of him. They were reversing magnets; repelled, like identical poles, when he got to close but attracted, like opposite poles, if he tried to slow down and drift apart.

Kelly's breathing was heavy and his blood was up. It took some time for him to calm down. He felt controlled, like a test subject in some white-coat's experiment. This despite the fact that he was now able to go as slow or as fast as he pleased.

For miles Kelly would speed up or slow down



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and watch the cars make way for him. The distance between the front of his car and the taillights of the others remained constant, always about six feet.

Without another civilian car blocking their way and without so much as a gas station attendant looking curiously on, the strange troika drove north.

The moon rose above the trees and the night passed, giving little notice to Kelly and his plight. The road stretched out like a long, leather watchband, conforming to the ground of the forests and farmlands and towns. Clouds pestered the waxing moon. And some time after three o'clock snowflakes started to fall, putting something solid between Kelly and the cars in front.

Kelly had expected to get to Springfield at about five. At quarter after the city was ten miles away. He was sitting back in the right lane going sixty-five when the brake lights on the car that had come up so suddenly flashed red and the car shot back more abruptly than it had come up. Kelly turned his head fast but the car was already behind him and he couldn't see the driver through the glare of the headlights. It was too dark and the car had receded too fast. Kelly went over the next hill staring at the lights in his rearview mirror. That was the last he saw of the black sedan.

Kelly cracked open his mouth and let a muttering laugh drop out. It was a sound of relief. All the pent-up tenseness seeped out of his skin. He pulled out into the passing lane and went up next to the rusted sedan, an animal loosed from its cage. When he came abreast of the other vehicle he kept his eyes trained on the driver. Epithets can't be heard at such high speeds; a dirty look would have to suffice. Kelly's eyes burned into the driver side window of the other car. But his hate suddenly turned to awe. The silhouette of the driver was a person in three dimensions. This wasn't overly surprising, but the driver had the nerve to turn her head in Kelly's direction and smile. This was amazing.

For the face Kelly saw in living width, depth, and height was that of a wretched old hag. She was the vilest, most hideous thing Kelly had ever beheld. Beady, devilish, laughing eyes were set out in front of her head in such a way that it appeared as if she had no sockets. The skin on her cheeks seemed tightly stretched despite scores of visible wrinkles. These seemed less like tiny folds and

more like lines of India ink drawn on by the feet of crawling spiders. Her hair was wispy and fine, the color of ashes. It flowed down her shoulders ending somewhere out of Kelly's sight. Both rows of her teeth were worn thin and came down into points like minuscule daggers or darts. She wore a dark wine-colored cowl that cast a shadow, black and concealing, which made it impossible to see where her neck joined her body.

Kelly's description of her took us through two more shots of whiskey each. He confessed that words did not do the hideous wretch justice. My description is pale compared with all that Kelly told me.

The woman stared at Kelly with her beady eyes. Kelly looked back out of awe. She touched a finger to her lips as if in thought. Then she pointed this same finger at Kelly. Her head fell back and her mouth gaped open. Her neck convulsed. The veins moved spastically, like long, thin maggots. Whether she was cackling or muttering a dark curse Kelly didn't know.

Kelly drove on towards Springfield in line with this vile witch and her speedy car. She would not yield to him.

With the city there came cars behind them, and in front, but the traffic scarcely noticed two cars riding neck and neck on a three-lane freeway. The woman let him set the pace and when taillights appeared up ahead in his lane he slowed. When he switched into the left lane she moved a lane over with him. He couldn't go back right because she had him boxed in.

Kelly's exit was five miles ahead. He wanted to stay on the left side of the sedan and give the old girl the slip just as soon as she was too far ahead to exit when he did. He stayed in his lane going the same speed and staring ahead as if his intention was to drive straight on into Lake Michigan.

Kelly glimpsed his exit out of the corner of his eye. He waited until the last possible second to slam on his brakes and spin the wheel hand over hand to the right. The cars behind him honked like the furies. Kelly barely made it. The left corner of his front bumper scrapped the edge of the concrete guardrail as he started up the ramp. Sparks flew up. It was the riskiest thing he had ever attempted and it was all in vain. Not only had he damaged his car, but also the old woman was already up the ramp while he was only halfway. Kelly hadn't seen if she had excited before him or if

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she had passed him on the ramp; he had been too intent on keeping his car from the junkyard and himself from death, half the time he'd been looking behind himself and the rest of the time he'd been watching the three feet immediately in front of his hood. He couldn't believe the old wretch had out-driven him. But sure enough, there she was in front of him. The stop sign at the top of the ramp was passed unheeded. She exceeded the speed limit a hundred feet down the cross street.

Kelly was happy to see her finally go, in whatever manner she pleased. It irked him a little that she had gotten in front of him somehow, but he decided not to let this bother him. At the stop sign he turned left as the woman had, and made the turns through his old neighborhood to Langdon Street. The trees were taller. A few houses had changed color. The cars in the driveways were newer models. But the street was still the same one he had pedaled up and down a thousand times on his bicycle.

On the ground, there was an inch of snow. The plows hadn't been through to scrape the street yet. There was a single set of tire tracks through the new snow. Kelly set his tires perfectly in these as he idled down the street. He followed the tracks ahead with his eyes and saw they ended at the car that had laid them. It was parked in front of his parents' house. Against the snow it appeared dark, the gathered remnants of night. Probably Uncle Zach, Kelly thought. Uncle Zach sometimes forgot things like the plows. He was a space cadet.

Then as Kelly rolled closer he realized that it was the same rusted car he had been following the entire night. The rust spots were the same, mapping the entire body of the car and the bumper had a stripe of red paint on it that Kelly had vaguely noticed before. Kelly kept at his idle speed, hesitant to reach his home. When he was only a few houses away the car pulled out into the street and sped down to the end of the block spitting snow backwards in an arc. Kelly watched it turn left at the corner as he turned into his parents driveway. Uncle Zach's car was parked there, right ahead of his.

Strange night, Kelly thought.

He stepped out of his car onto the lawn and left a shoe sole shaped dent in the fresh snow. He stretched his cramped form up towards the sky in its last hour of night. In this prostrate position he felt a slight tingle

in his tailbone. He stood suddenly still, put his hands on his knees, and a chill racked the entire length of his spine. He stayed like that for nearly half a minute, his shoulders together, doubled over and shivering. Then he grabbed his skin-covered skull with his hands as if he were going to crush it. He stood up straight.

He marched up to the door. There was a frozen wreath still on it. Kelly dried his eyeballs with the back of his coat sleeve. He rapped his hand in the center of the snow-flecked pine boughs and twisted the doorknob. He didn't wait to push open the door.

His mother was standing in the entryway with his Uncle Zach. His uncle's arms were wrapped around his mother in a tight embrace. She was crying. As she released each sob it appeared as if she were trying to escape the embrace but when she again drew breath she fell farther into it.

"Your father just passed on," his uncle said. "We checked in on him as we heard you pull up. He was already gone"

His mother's low murmuring cries continued to drift out from his uncle's breast.

And that was Kelly's tale. Kelly claimed that night was with him every moment. He told me he tried to deny it, to forget the ride home the day his father died, but he never could. It haunted him. The funeral a week later brought no solace at all. The passage of years was less help still.

That night's story became a part of Kelly. He said he couldn't truly connect with people until he told them of that night. When he told me how this story affected him I honestly I felt sorry for the guy. I had a quantity of whiskey in me by the close of the story and I think I hugged him. Still, I thought I would just wake up the next morning with a terrific hangover and hardly remember what I had done the night before. It wasn't like that though. One night with some hack college professor and three years later I'm forcing myself to commit the story to paper.

The story was longer when I heard it in the bar, and better and more real. Don't get me wrong, everything here is remembered truth. What I don't remember, I just leave out. I don't embellish at all.

Another reason I'm preserving this on paper is because I saw the cursed sedans myself. This was about

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two month's ago. I was driving through Nebraska with my fiancée on the way to her second cousin's second wedding. It was a Tuesday night at around one o'clock. We came up right behind a brown sedan and before I could pass, before it even clicked in my head what it was, I saw the headlights of the black sedan in my rearview mirror. They were the brightest headlights I'd ever seen.

There was no way I was going to spend the night trapped behind these cars and besides, I had my lovely with me. So I slammed on the brakes and when I did, the headlights fell back. I took the first illegal gravel U-turn at the minimum limit. Ashley, my lovely, just about flipped out. She was screaming about being late to the wedding and cursing at me and interrogating me at the top of her lungs. I looked into her hazelnut eyes. They looked grayer and older than I ever remember them being. As we drove, I told the story to her again. I had told it before one night when we were both tipsy. She didn't remember that night or didn't take me seriously or chose to forget it or something. In any case, I came off as a lunatic. She couldn't understand why I refused to keep going even after I told her the story. Needless to say, Ashley and I are no longer engaged.

It's sort of weird. I don't know why the story chokes me up when I tell it to one person or flows like soapy water when I tell it to someone else. But it does. It changes. In a way I think it's sort of like a Collar of Fate for me. I just figure Ashley and I were never meant to be and that's that. I'm not mad about it. It's just the way it is. And other people who think the story is a joke, or think that I'm a little off kilter—I just never develop a very deep relationship with them. It's no one's fault, but it gives me clues as to what is meant to be and what isn't. I don't fight it.

If this story stays with you, you are like me. And like Kelly. We'd connect if we ever met. If you forget it, you weren't meant to be haunted.

Every time I drive late at night, even if I'm just coming home from a film, I remember Kelly's long drive. Every time I think of my loved ones, those I'm at ease with, and those I like and admire but just don't gel with, I think of a man trying to get through to a complete stranger in a bar.

Stories won't kill you. But they can haunt.

Shane Noecker has declined commenting. His piece, however, speaks for itself. (editor's note)